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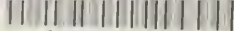
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USER PERSPECTIVES OF QUALITATIVE METHODS.

UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE CHALLENGE*



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USER PERSPECTIVES OF
QUALITATIVE METHODS:
UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING
THE CHALLENGE*

March 29, 1976

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*Presented at the 1976 Annual Meetings of the Pacific Sociological Association. Reprinted here by special permission.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is offered as a continuation of an interest to orient scientific social research toward the needs of users (Gold 1975). The perspective taken here is that of the user agency, specifically the state/local government agency, looking to the research community to explain some of the problems, expectations, and biases associated with qualitative research. Taking this perspective deliberately dichotomizes user agencies into the state/local and federal categories.¹ Understanding and working with federal agencies are topics which have been treated by others (Baker 1975) and will be passed over in this context. Hopefully, the emphasis on state/local agencies will stimulate an interest in doing research for these units of government and in providing information which will facilitate acceptance of qualitative strategies. For various reasons, state and local agencies have a growing need for sophisticated social science research and possess an increased ability to finance such undertakings. Applied social science research is on the rise (Baker 1975; Gelfand 1975). It behooves the professional researcher to know something about the needs and wishes of those who fund research, particularly applied research, in order to successfully compete in the market.

THE PROBLEM

As seen by user agencies, qualitative methods have problems of

¹This dichotomy is based upon the degree of formality involved in the proposal evaluation process and the degree to which the researcher can intervene. The federal government has formal bureaucratic structures with rigid requirements to regulate the submission and evaluation of proposals. Intervention in this process is relatively difficult. This is much less the case at the state and local level. There, research contracting is relatively informal and it is possible to effectively influence the process if one has the know-how.

credibility and usefulness. Qualitative methods do not seem to generate the type of information wanted or required by users. The methods are not understood, and the results are distrusted and generally regarded as less than useful in the pragmatic, real world, problem solving sense.

This is a harsh evaluation and one which is difficult to work around. However, an understanding of the expectations and environments of agencies can facilitate acceptance of qualitative perspectives. Two factors appear to direct the agency away from qualitative work. Those factors are: (1) the agency perspective of "research" and "science" and (2) the requirements and environment surrounding the decision-making function in government agencies. Continuing in the "ideal type" framework and at the risk of over-simplification, I wish to briefly explain how these two dimensions determine the evaluation of qualitative strategies.

RESEARCH AND SCIENCE

Within the research community, "research" is an activity designed to produce new knowledge or test and validate the old. Ideally, the ultimate aim is a contribution to theory building. Science and research are inextricably woven together. Science denotes an attitude or disposition of skeptical objectivity toward data collection and evaluation. Science is the frame of mind which guides research activity.

The agency perspective toward "research" and "science" is somewhat at variance with the description above. Research is seen as an activity designed to synthesize or combine existing information. It is a bringing together function. Knowledge is new in the sense that a particular combination didn't exist before. The aim of research is to define available options and courses of action. Unlike in the research community,

here the concepts of science and research are frequently divorced. There is research and there is also scientific research. Agencies do a lot of the former, little of the latter. Frequently, agency research begins with its conclusions formulated. It then proceeds with a research design using either or both of two basic formats: 1) something is wrong and must be changed or, 2) something is right and must be defended. Science is not seen as part and parcel of research. It seems to exist as an independent entity made up of a set of practices, conceptual schemata, or types of data rather than a perspective or outlook. The "hard" science - "soft" science, "hard" method - "soft" method dichotomies still apply. This results in the common evaluation that chemistry is more scientific than sociology and that neopositivistic, statistical approaches are scientifically superior to ethnography. Finally, science denotes objectivity, and objectivity means it's not slanted. Just what that means is frequently unclear.

While agencies do not routinely link "science" and "research" in their practices, they expect the two to be woven together in research they support or buy from the outside. Given their definitions of the concepts, this expectation can be translated to mean "provide us a set of procedures or tools which objectively brings together information and which will delimit available alternatives". The unspoken evaluation in this definition is that qualitative approaches are less objective and less able to point out specific courses of action than quantitative techniques.

THE DECISION MAKING ENVIRONMENT

Popular stereotype notwithstanding, agencies operate in an environment of pressing demands and limited resources. Moreover, it is an

ambiguous environment where organizational goals and objectives lack specificity, are subject to public scrutiny, and are buffeted by the crosscurrents of vested interest. In this context the agency has an ongoing need for knowledge upon which it can base and justify decisions and the required courses of action. There is a search for the ever elusive "fact" and "consensus". And just as important, fact and consensus are typically needed to meet problems in the short run. Given the volatility of the administrative and legislative processes, response to situational exigency is the order of the day. The development and implementation of long-range strategies also tie in the picture, but at a much reduced level of importance.

The target of agency action is reaching, justifying, and implementing decisions. To do this, the agency must have adequate information which also can satisfy the requirements structured into the agency environment. Agencies need information which is "factual" (or, at least, appears to be), points toward consensus, can be rapidly developed or relatively so, and which can withstand scrutiny by the public or vested interest groups. Quantitative research strategies usually are seen as providing the answer to these requirements. Furthermore, the agency understanding of the concepts of science and research act as a predisposition strengthening the quantitative bent.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The agency's tendency to rely upon quantitative methods is difficult to overcome. Researchers interested in following qualitative strategies must be prepared to better merchandise their wares and to deliver a product which can be applied to practical problems and needs. The former task is considerably easier than the latter but there are steps which can

be taken to accomplish both.

To "sell" qualitative research, the researcher must be able to write, present, and explain his proposal so that it will be understood. This includes being able to point out how a particular strategy is carried out, its advantages and disadvantages, how and why the method is scientific, the type(s) or results (findings) one can expect, and the cost of using the strategy. Some additional steps which can facilitate this process are:

1. Emphasizing that the scientific component of the research is induced by the attitude of the researcher. Or, that science is a set of attitudes put into practice and not a practice in and of itself. Qualitative methods, like those of numerical origin, are within the purview of science if the researcher wants them to be.
2. Emphasize that all disciplines, irrespective of their subject matter, seek to identify natural or social law. This focuses the scientist on a study of things which are common, shared, patterned, and recurrent. The individual or idiosyncratic action is not the prime focus of a scientist. Therefore, fears that qualitative research will become enmeshed with a data base of rumor, personal gripes, and individualized interpretations are largely unfounded.
3. Emphasize that qualitative strategies contain internal checks to judge the accuracy and validity of the data being collected. Because something is seen or heard doesn't make fact, consensus, or even tendency. More is required. The careful qualitative researcher goes the extra mile to be sure that his observations and interpretations cross check with those of the subject population.

4. Emphasize that qualitative methods are not really unusual ways to collect data. People in everyday life are constantly using qualitative procedures in their narrations, conversations, interviews, and observations. The difference between "everyday" and "scientific" qualitative research is a matter of attitude and refinement.
5. Emphasize that the research will function to "bring information together". Generally avoid conveying the impression (by work or deed) that information will be manufactured. This is especially crucial for descriptive narratives generated by qualitative techniques since the ability to "go back to the numbers" is negated. Also, by stressing the "bringing information together" aspect of the work, the researcher will receive the added benefit of (1) being seen as providing a service similar to existing agency research practices and (2) being conservative. By being seen as similar and conservative, the proposed work will appear as less threatening. Since qualitative strategies are unknown to many agencies, it is, perhaps, prudent to minimize wave making at first.

Producing a research product which will meet the pragmatic needs of the agency requires extensive coordination and communication. As simple as it may sound, the important first step, (even prior to the selling of the project) is to sit down with the agency's representatives and find out what they want. Determine beforehand what the work will be used for, what types of specific information are sought (i.e. descriptions, head counts, interpretations), applicable time constraints, and whether recommendations are to be prepared. Also probe to determine if the agency has already formulated the research conclusions and is merely seeking outside



"objectivity" to confirm its predisposition. Evaluate your abilities and interests against the needs and desires of the agency and only promise what can be delivered. Any excuse for failing to produce the promised merchandise is a poor excuse.

Another important step is to put together a coherent, readable report. This requires sound organization and a writing style which minimizes the use of technical jargon. Additional suggestions include:

1. Prepare a methodological appendix where the steps of the method(s) are clearly laid out. Include discussions of sampling techniques, if relevant, as well as discussions of procedures used to cross check and validate the data. These latter elements are very important since the qualitative researcher lacks recourse to the confidence interval. Moreover, since one of the acid tests of the research is how well the methodology can withstand criticism, the agency is always interested in having a detailed synopsis available for reference and peace of mind.
2. Condense the collected information into a series of major and minor points and illustrate each with examples from the data. Direct quotes are potent especially when two, three or more different sources point in the same direction. It's also helpful to point out some unique or idiosyncratic interpretations especially when offered by the subjects. This shows the range and diversity of the topic at hand and demonstrates that the researcher has not been misguided by individual actions.
3. Avoid the mistake of interpreting all the data. To the extent possible let it "speak for itself". Follow the dictates of the "face

value hypothesis." That is, assume the subjects have "told it like it is" and that the readers will understand and accept these statements at face value.

4. In a similar vein, clearly distinguish between narrative and interpretation and when the subjects are speaking vis a vis the researcher. The qualitative researcher must go to extra lengths to guard against the impression that he is putting words into the subjects' mouths, psychoanalyzing respondents, or worse.
5. Generally speaking, if something has to be said, say it. Don't beat around the bush with qualifiers. However, (second qualifier in three sentences) learn the agency writing style before putting anything on paper. Some places seem to thrive on obtuse writing and the researcher should endeavor to provide what's desirable.
6. If the work is to produce specific recommendations for policy or action, be sure the recommendations are tied to the data. If their basis in fact isn't evident, the recommendations will be construed as fictional.
7. When a research strategy calls for both quantitative and qualitative techniques, the two approaches should be presented so they complement one another. Seek to affirm the results achieved by one method with comparable conclusions from an opposite approach. Be careful, however, to avoid leaving the impression that results reached using qualitative techniques need validation by quantitative methods. If such a negative impression should emerge, the first question will be: "Why do a qualitative study in the first place?"
8. Choose words carefully. Remember the environment in which the agency operates. It's a political environment. This doesn't

necessarily mean pressure to be unscientific or mealy-mouthed but it always means discretion.

9. Remember that the agency needs research which will satisfy a wide variety of critics. Academics principally answer to a jury of peers - people who know and share basic assumptions about the "rules of the game." The agency is not so blessed. Its critics will seek any flaw or imprecision to put the agency at a disadvantage. For those reasons, the research methodology must be extremely precise and scientifically sound.
10. Also keep in mind that agencies, especially their decision makers, operate in an insecure environment where "consensus" is a valued and highly sought after commodity. Stay away from research methods which suggest elitism (i.e. approaches which focus data collection on community influentials, power elites, etc.). It's not that agency people are exceptionally equalitarian. They rely upon other elites for information and not upon the citizen in the street. But..., agency decision makers will not trust information gathered from elites unless they gather it. Dealing with elites is part of the environment they know, and they know that one cannot trust statements from other elitists to be honest or accurate. Elitism is also poor politics and to forestall any possible criticism or confrontation with the non-elites, agency decision makers will disassociate themselves from studies with an elitist hue. Controversial results could invite disaster for the agency.

CONCLUSION

Much of what has been said in this paper will also apply to those interested in doing quantitative research. While the two approaches may have been cast as competing rivals, the importance of both is recognized. The research community can profit from increasing its ties to state/local agencies and vice versa. Work needs to be done and that is probably more important than a particular methodological approach. But is also true that the qualitative researcher works from a relatively disadvantaged position, and if this approach is to be productively employed, it needs a special boost. Hopefully, this paper has been a step in that direction.

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